

*Transformative Beauty: Art Museums in Industrial Britain* by Amy Woodson-Boulton. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2012. xiii, 270 pp. + 16 b/w illus. ISBN978-0-8047-7804-6. \$55.00.

By examining the circumstances behind the foundation of the city art-museums of Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester, which all opened between 1867 and 1883, Amy Woodson-Boulton fills a considerable gap in museological knowledge. Hitherto only discussed in short accounts, or lumped together as “hodge podge collections” with the purpose of controlling the lower classes, the art museums are presented here in their most illuminating context: that of each other. Woodson-Boulton argues that these three institutions were part of a broader reaction to industrial capitalist society, in a reading that is deeply self-conscious about leisure time and the material abundance that enabled their existence. Her extensive use of archival resources brings to life the characters who made up the committees that created these still extant institutions. These reformers, philanthropists, and local politicians each had different motivations and expectations in creating palaces of art for the common people, and Woodson-Boulton explores how localized discussions related to national issues. The founders were filled with Ruskinian and evangelical zeal to better the lives of ordinary people in these industrial cities by using “the didactic and morally transforming power of objects.” The result was what the author calls “contradictory monuments” that, on the one hand, celebrated the wealth of the industrial cities and their elite, and, on the other, hoped to mitigate the worst effects of industrialization through beauty. Unlike that in continental Europe, the museum movement in Britain was locally driven rather than being controlled or paid for by central government. Woodson-Boulton charts the foundation, opening policies, collecting practices, art and educational materials, and, finally, the movement of museums into the new aesthetic climate of the 20th century. The passionate starting point was “the idea of art as experience, and of beauty as social transformation,” a vision which managed to create lasting institutions and social policy.

The Introduction sets the scene for this new method of reform, “social change through aesthetic experience.” It is tempting to see “the museum” as a metaphor for society as a whole, where the rationalized collection imposes and reflects cultural drives. However, Woodson-Boulton agrees with other recent scholarship in finding more diverse methods, groups, and philosophies at work. The histories of these three regional art museums enable an examination of the emerging conflicts over the use and meaning of art. Woodson-Boulton explains the social and economic circumstances whereby the pace of technological and industrial change created anxieties about consumption,